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ABSTRACT

From 1971 through 1973, a federally-supported project, Project Upswing, tried to help children with minimal learning difficulties to function better and more independently in school. Upswing was conducted by staff from the local university schools of education and the public schools systems. The children were first graders selected by their teachers at the beginning of the school year. Half of the children were tutored and half were treated as a comparison group. Tutors planned their own activities, with no prescribed program. An evaluation reported findings in four areas. (1) The two-year experience indicated that tutoring does help children to an important degree. (2) There is nothing to indicate an association between school achievement and self-esteem. However, an improvement in self-esteem will occur with personal attention from someone the child perceives to be important (i.e., a tutor or teacher). (3) Upswing found no support for the common belief that visual-motor skills are important in the development of reading skills. (4) Children tended to maintain their age-adjusted standard scores in reading during the year after Upswing, which indicates that the benefits of the program may well be stable. (TS)

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## Using community resources to improve the first grade experience

# PROJECT UPSWING

## A summary

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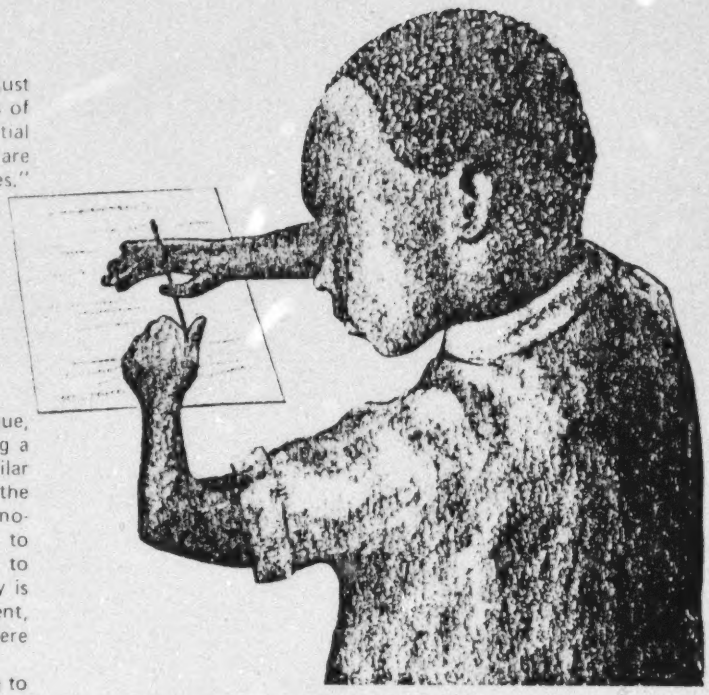
Infinite riches in a little room . . . a group of children just starting school . . . yet research says that in a typical class of there will be five or six children, about 20%, whose potential probably will remain hidden for many years. These are children with the mysterious "minimal learning difficulties."



## THE PROBLEM

Minimal learning difficulties (MLD) is a deliberately vague, catch-all term for whatever it is that might be preventing a child from acquiring school skills in ways and at a pace similar to his classmates. Minimal learning difficulties include the ambiguous categories of perceptual, psychomotor and emotional problems, slow maturation, etc. It is very difficult to define such problems precisely, and still more difficult to ascertain their causes with any certainty. The terminology is put forth frequently as an explanation of low achievement, but there is little evidence about how such problems interfere with development of school skills.

Children who do not learn like their peers are troubling to teachers, who often simply do not have time for the trial and error type of individual attention that seems necessary to help the MLD child to sure footing. Diagnosis and help from specialists is expensive, and usually is not readily available. There are many children whose needs for special educational services are far more compelling, so it may be tempting to classify the MLD child as a "late bloomer" or to decide he "doesn't want to learn." Without special help, such a child may outgrow his difficulties, but the *laissez faire* approach is risky. The child may develop serious problems.

## A SOLUTION

From 1971-1973, a Federally-supported project called Upswing has tried to find ways to help children with minimal learning difficulties on the road to successful, independent functioning in school. This was a volunteer tutoring project conducted in four cities – Denver, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Oxford, Mississippi. Upswing was conducted by staff from local university schools of education, in cooperation with the public school systems and, where they existed, local school volunteer organizations.

The children were first-graders selected by their teachers at the beginning of the school year. Half of the children were tutored and half were taken as a comparison group. Most of the volunteer tutors were married women who did not have jobs outside the home, or college students. They were of all ages and a quite well-educated group.

In the first year of the project, the university staffs provided training to half the tutors; the others had only a brief orientation. Formal pre-service training was the rule. In the second year, all tutors received training, and workshop-type sessions held throughout the tutoring period were favored by the participants.

Tutors planned their own activities, with suggestions from teachers and project staff. There was no prescribed program. The importance of a warm, fostering relationship between child and tutor was stressed. Academically, emphasis was on development of the children's reading skills and visual-motor coordination, but tutors tackled most any need.

## WHAT WAS LEARNED FROM PROJECT UPSWING

The project was evaluated for impact on children's development of reading and visual-motor integration skills, and self-esteem. The evaluation was also concerned with whether training increased the tutors' effectiveness, and if so, which training approaches seemed the best.

The children's skills in the criterion areas were tested before and after tutoring with a battery of standardized instruments and an experimental self-esteem measure. Knowledge of basic concepts such as proximity, similarity, size and spatial relationships (above, beneath, etc.), was measured by the Test of Basic Experiences (TOBE), which also served as an indicator of family background factors relevant to academic achievement.

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The evaluation found that Upswing was effective, as follows:

> *Upswing tutoring was effective, and the project seems to have given unexpected benefits beyond the good of tutoring.*

Upswing developed in such a way that it had two results — one intended and one a byproduct. The two-year experience indicated that tutoring does help children who receive it to an important degree. The experience also indicated that a project like Upswing, under certain conditions, can extend its impact to teachers, and through them, to children who do not receive tutoring. The tutored groups of children in the first year made significantly greater gains in reading than did the untutored comparison group. In the second year, tutored and untutored alike demonstrated clear progress in reading and in development of self-esteem and basic experiences. The only area studied in which tutoring did not appear to have appreciable impact was visual-motor integration, although there was a glimmer of improvement in the second year.

The gains of control group children in the second year have been attributed to Upswing, with teachers as the agents. The project greatly strengthened its efforts to involve teachers in the second year, and it appears that teachers related differently to at least the control group children because of the influence of the project.

The project's goal was to help children realize their potential for normal functioning in the skill areas studied before they began to see themselves as "slow learners." The test results indicate this goal generally was accomplished in the areas of reading and self-esteem. End-of-year test means in both areas were in the average range, whereas at the beginning of the year the mean scores were in the low-average or borderline range. The children had farther to go in terms of basic experiences and did not pull up to average, but they did make significant progress.

Sometimes amount of progress has to do with tutoring goals. If, for example, the goal is to help children overcome a reading deficiency in recognizing vowel sounds, one can anticipate great success from a program of one-to-one drill over a few weeks. Upswing's goal for reading was much broader and a multitude of nonspecific deficiencies were being addressed. Further, the measurement device was a standardized instrument. Tutoring was not measure-referenced; rather, the attempt was to help children acquire skills that could be generalized. In these circumstances, the amount of mean progress demonstrated in Upswing seems both reasonable and quite heartening.

> *The attributes studied in Upswing developed independently of each other. None was a catalyst. Children experienced different amounts of success in different areas.*

The Upswing children tended, at the beginning of the year, to show low skills in all criterion areas. However, the initial associations are misleading in that development in the various areas seems to go on independently. In other words, the criterion variables were orthogonal. Other researchers appear to

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disagree; they have found rather strong associations. The difference in findings probably is attributable to two conditions:

1. The Upswing evaluation looked at amount of *change* while the test developers cited looked at actual scores at a given point in time.
2. There were considerable differences in the operational definitions (measures) used.

Knowledge of the amount of association in terms of change or development would seem to have more utility in helping children, but the necessary measurements are more time-consuming to obtain and more complicated to interpret. Thus, the development approach is not often used.

Probably most people in education and educational research believe that there is an association between school achievement level and self-esteem. The Upswing data do not belie this; they simply indicate that development of self-esteem may or may not go on, regardless of a child's academic development. Individually, Upswing data are not conclusive, but the overall pattern is clear – that significant improvement in self-esteem will occur with personal attention from someone the child perceives as important (be it tutor, teacher, or another), and who believes in the child's capabilities and values his accomplishments whatever they may be. This improvement in self-esteem may be preceded by an improvement in skills. In some children it may be concurrent with, or followed by, improved skills.

Judging from the content of reading readiness inventories, it appears that visual-motor integration skills are commonly considered important in the development of reading skill. In the two years of Upswing, no support for that belief was found.

It often has been put forth that "cultural deprivation" blocks development of reading skills. The Upswing evaluation measured factors represented by that term through the Test of Basic Experiences, which would have to come from home and kindergarten since the children were first-graders. Kindergarten experience showed no relationship to initial TOBE results for the Upswing children; therefore, it is assumed that the measure was of home-contributed basic experiences. Although the correlations between initial TOBE scores and initial scores from the other tests were significant, "treatment" appeared to override the influences of basic experiences or family background.

> *It looks as if tutoring could be an effective substitute for remedial reading. Moreover, it appears that the project presence may have made remedial reading work better.*

The above statements may seem extravagant, but the Upswing data showed that tutored children averaged about as much gain in reading test standard score as children who had remedial reading. Moreover, children who had both a tutor and remedial reading averaged no more gain than those who had just one or the other. In fact, there was a suggestion that having both might be detrimental.

The follow-up on children tutored in the first year of Upswing added an interesting twist. These children had no involvement with the project during their second year in school except that they were tested at the end of the year. Of the follow-up group, 86 had special services and 80% of those had either remedial reading or a reading tutor (mostly the former). This group showed a slight decline in reading skill on the follow-up test in relation to the test given at the end of their association with Upswing. Although these data are not conclusive, they strongly suggest that under *ordinary* circumstances, remedial reading and tutoring may not be effective program approaches. It appears that being identified with a well-defined special project makes a difference in the kind of attention given children and the benefits they derive from it. Further, in view of the follow-up data, the possibility must be considered that it was not remedial reading that caused children in the second year of Upswing to gain, but instead something in their relationship with tutors or teachers.

> *Children generally held their ground in the year after Upswing; although they did not continue to increase their rates of development in reading.*

The children tended to maintain their age-adjusted standard scores in reading during the year after Upswing. That is, they continued to acquire reading skills at the rate they had established by the end of the Upswing year. This was true of both former tutored and former control group children. This indicates that the benefits of Upswing tutoring may well be stable.

> *Children who were retained in first grade retrogressed in reading during the follow-up year.*

The decline in mean reading scores of the follow-up groups is mostly attributable to losses by children who were retained. The mean standard score of these children was in the average range at the end of Upswing. A year later, the group had fallen

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back into the low-average range. The mean loss was six points in standard score. (The initial standard deviation was small: 9.3 points; the final standard deviation was even smaller: 7.4 points. This unfortunately indicates that the group was becoming more homogeneous in reading; i.e., the highest children dropped the most, to meet up with the lower ones.) Children placed in combination first and second grade classes averaged about one point lower standard scores, which could be test error. Children who went on to second grade averaged about half a point gain, also not interpretable.

The decision to retain does not appear to have been based on reading level. However, retention had a definite negative effect on children's reading skills. Their reading losses may be attributable to lower teacher expectancies, to insufficiently challenging reading material, and to the influence of the reading level of classmates. It appears reasonable to assume that these children lost skills in other areas as well. If the trend should continue, the children will lose status in the eyes of their peers, teachers, families, and, inevitably, in their own eyes, although they did not show lower self-esteem on the test or teacher assessment of self-confidence after one year. We do not know why these children were retained or if there was any objective foundation for the decision, but the evidence we have indicates that it was likely a bad decision.

> *The people involved in Upswing found it worthwhile and wanted the project to continue.*

Tutors, teachers, principals, and project staff made it clear that they consider Upswing both valuable to children and personally rewarding. All four project cities have made plans to continue the project with local funds. In two of the cities project offshoots already flourish.

## UPSWING'S FUTURE

It appears at this writing that Upswing has a future; it should. Compared to its expensive alternatives, it probably is a good investment for most communities. Perhaps one of its most beneficial future uses will be in the less populous, less wealthy areas of the country, where children in need often do not receive professional help. Upswing offers them paraprofessional help that could be just as effective at a small fraction of the cost.

Perhaps sprawling suburban school systems should reevaluate their expenditures for first- and second-grade reading remediation. A small portion of that budget might be well spent in establishing an Upswing type volunteer program.

As has been seen, Upswing can work even amid the complexities of a metropolitan school system. However, it requires reasonably sophisticated management to do so because of the communications and timing required. Despite this, the program is still probably far more cost-effective than anything presently available.

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